

*Department
of
Human Services*

Articles in Today's Clips

Friday, January 12, 2006

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*Prepared by the
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*Important story at
this spot

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Canton man faces charges in baby's death

Boy was in township resident's care when he suffered broken ribs, other injuries, police say.

Dorothy Bourdet / The Detroit News
Friday, January 13, 2006

CANTON TOWNSHIP -- A 23-year-old Canton Township man is expected to be arraigned today in 35th District Court on charges that could go as high as felony murder, in the death of his girlfriend's 8-month-old baby boy.

Police and firefighters responded Tuesday morning to a 911 call from the suspect's mother, who said the baby was not breathing. Officials determined that the child had died sometime during the night.

The Wayne County medical examiner found evidence of blunt force trauma on the baby, including broken ribs, spleen and liver ruptures, broken blood vessels in the eyes, bruising and blood in the abdomen.

At least six cases of infant or baby abuse are making their way through Wayne County courts, including a Highland Park couple whose 4-month-old girl was found to have a brain hemorrhage, burns on the head, ankles and buttocks and several fractured ribs, and a Detroit woman accused of suffocating her 9-month-old baby and putting his body into a garbage bag.

Canton Township Police arrested the suspect Wednesday, after he came to the police station voluntarily for questioning and admitted to "actions that caused (the baby's) death," Canton Township Sgt. Richard Pomorski said Thursday.

Police said the man, who was alone with the baby in a home he shared with his mother and the child's 20-year-old mother, told police he had been trying to get the baby to stop crying while trying to feed him, and lost his temper.

"He took some action to quiet the child and as a result of that action, injuries were inflicted and those injuries were consistent with what was found by the medical examiner to have caused the baby's death," Pomorski said. "(He said) he didn't realize what he was doing was so severe."

After the assault, the baby quieted down and the suspect put him to bed in a playpen. The next morning, after the baby was unresponsive, the suspect's mother, who did not know what happened, called police.

The infant's mother had been working at one of her several jobs while her boyfriend was watching the child, police said.

Police were not releasing the names of the infant's mother or father, or of the suspect's mother. The baby's father lives in Detroit.

In the Sheldon Road neighborhood where the baby lived, neighbors were shaken by the death.

"It's a family-oriented neighborhood. That is very shocking to have it happen next to your house," said Robert Carter, who lives just north of the house where the suspect lived. Carter said his only contact with the occupants of that house was when Carter returned their dogs, which had gotten out.

No one answered the door Thursday at the small, red brick house where police showed up on Tuesday morning.

The suspect was being held Thursday at the Canton Township Police Department. *You can reach Dorothy Bourdet at (734) 462-2203 or dbourdet@detnews.com.*

Wayne County

Baby's bones broken; dad charged

January 13, 2006

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A father from Trenton is charged with battering his infant daughter, leaving her with 11 broken bones, a fractured skull and brain damage to the point that doctors said she looked like she'd gone through the windshield of a car crashing at 50 m.p.h.

Ryan Popalek, 25, was charged Wednesday with first-degree child abuse and assault with intent to murder after he and his wife took their 2-month-old daughter, Mianna Popalek, to Oakwood Southshore Medical Center in Trenton for having blood in her stool. She also was uncontrollably fussy, according to Trenton police.

The child was transferred from Oakwood Southshore to Oakwood Hospital in Dearborn, and then to Children's Hospital of Michigan in Detroit. She suffered seizures at Children's, and surgeons there discovered old and fresh bleeding on her brain. The child was hospitalized for 27 days and then released to the care of her maternal grandparents under the supervision of state Child Protective Services workers.

After a five-month investigation, Popalek, a truck driver, surrendered to police and was arraigned on the charges Wednesday in 33rd District Court in Woodhaven. He was released after posting 10% of a \$50,000 bond, pending a Feb. 3 preliminary examination.

Popalek denies ever hurting his baby, his attorney, Stephen Boak, said Thursday.

"From my knowledge of things, I'm convinced that the prosecution is not going to be able to carry their burden of proof," Boak said. "There were a number of people who had access to the child for varying periods of time, some of them more than" Popalek.

Boak said Trenton police and the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office apparently chose Popalek as the primary suspect because of his size. Popalek, who stands 7 feet tall, towered over his attorney at Wednesday's arraignment.

"The police stated in my presence while interviewing him, 'Can you imagine what a jury is going to do seeing you sitting there' " in court, Boak said. "It's one of the things they are relying on."

The evidence largely consists of 400 pages of medical records compiled by doctors and other personnel at three hospitals, said Trenton Police Lt. Greg Plagens.

"All the doctors involved stated that this is a textbook case of shaken baby syndrome," Plagens said.

"It's under the umbrella of child abuse. All the doctors stated the injuries are non-accidental trauma."

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Friday, January 13, 2006
Betty DeRamus/Detroit News

Limitations on sex crime punishment need more debate

There's no time limit on how long victims of sexual assaults will agonize or ache. And there's no telling how deep they'll burrow inside themselves or how much corked-up rage they're carrying around.

It's been more than 50 years since a stranger molested Sen. Shirley Johnson, R-Troy, on her way to school, but she has not forgotten the incident or shed all its scars.

It was in her heart when she introduced legislation in 2000 that eliminated the six-year statute of limitations for rape and other violent sexual assaults when DNA evidence is available. That legislation became law in 2001, the House passing it by 97-0 and the Senate by 35-0.

On Wednesday, Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton revealed that he had been abused 60 years ago by a priest. The 75-year-old prelate didn't seem to have forgotten any details, including the fact that the unidentified priest would try to put his hands in "the back of your pants."

And like Shirley Johnson, Gumbleton brought up his never-before publicized abuse to make the case for legal changes.

Bishop backs extension

Gumbleton supports proposed legislation in Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York that -- for one year only -- would extend the statute of limitations on civil suits involving sexual abuse.

This would make it possible for people to file suits about alleged incidents dating back 35 years. According to Claudia Vercellotti, the Toledo director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, this one-year window of opportunity would allow "victims to publicly expose the predators who hurt them ... so that parents, neighbors and employers will know about potentially dangerous men."

"... Anyone who ignored a sex crime, shielded a molester, destroyed a document or deceived a victim's family may also be exposed," Vercellotti added.

However, Msgr. Ricardo Bass, Cardinal Adam Maida's delegate for clergy matters, said in a statement that the statute of limitations on such cases "... has served our society well in protecting the rights of everyone, especially after a long passage of time."

Statute has limits

The statute of limitations in Michigan on civil cases filed by anyone abused as a minor expires when the victim is 19.

It's hard to see how anyone can claim that the statute has served all segments of society. That's especially true in cases where allegedly abusive priests were shielded from the eyes of the law and bounced from parish to parish for decades.

It remains to be seen whether the legislation Gumbleton now supports is the best way to compensate victims of sexual abuse or create strong cases against possible predators.

All the same, Gumbleton's story and the continuing push for reforms make the point that this issue remains alive.

Society must continue to search for ways to punish even elderly sexual predators, make peace with families that were deceived and show victims that, at last, someone does see and smell their pain.

Betty DeRamus' column runs Monday, Wednesday and Friday in Metro. Reach her at (313) 222-2296 or bderamus@detnews.com.

Friday, January 13, 2006

Judge's sentence fires up calls for tougher punishment, more treatment

Published: Saturday, January 7, 2006

By Terri Hallenbeck

Free Press Staff Writer

MONTPELIER, VT -- The governor said he was appalled and a group of legislators called for immediate changes to the sentencing laws in response to a two-month prison sentence given this week to a Williston man who sexually assaulted a young girl.

The furor continued Friday over Judge Edward Cashman's decision Wednesday that means Mark Hulett is likely to spend 60 days in prison. Cashman said the short sentence would allow Hulett, who did not qualify for sex-offender treatment in prison, to receive treatment in the community while on probation. If he fails to follow instructions, he could face up to life in prison.

Prosecutors sought a sentence of eight years. The Corrections Department recommended three years in prison. Cashman said at sentencing that treatment was a greater priority than punishment. State's Attorney Bob Simpson said Friday he plans to file a motion asking the judge to reconsider the sentence.

Legislators and Gov. Jim Douglas endured a torrent of calls from Vermonters angry about the sentence and the finding that Hulett, who repeatedly sexually assaulted a friend's daughter for four years, was a low risk to reoffend and therefore didn't qualify for treatment. The Governor's Office received more than 200 calls and messages Friday criticizing the sentence.

Douglas issued a statement Friday blasting Cashman's decision and saying he'd directed the Agency of Human Services to explore whether Hulett might be kept behind bars longer than 60 days, although Cashman made an agreement with Hulett that if he were held longer than 90 days, he could withdraw his guilty plea.

The governor's statement didn't mention the Corrections Department's sex-offender classification system. In an interview, however, he said that was among the things he directed the Human Services secretary to review. "I've asked Mike Smith to look into it and determine whether the classification system is appropriate."

"I think it's healthy to review it," Corrections Commissioner Rob Hofmann said. He said the system takes into account some 50 factors in determining an offender's risk, and treatment within the community while on probation has proven effective for many offenders.

A group of Republican legislators, meanwhile, called for a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years for sex offenses against children younger than 12.

"I've received a number of calls from people who are outraged and angered by Judge Cashman's decision," said Sen. George Copenrath, R-Caledonia. "Being out in 60 days and in a treatment

program does not protect our public, and that is the primary purpose of our jails."

House Judiciary Chairman William Lippert, D-Hinesburg, said Cashman's sentence troubled him, too, and his committee has been considering longer sentences as part of a package of sex-offender legislation.

Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Richard Sears, D-Bennington, joined the group of Republicans at a news conference Friday afternoon. "I'm here because public safety is not a partisan issue," Sears said.

Sears said he supported such mandatory minimum sentences last year, but the proposal died because of opposition from prosecutors and victims' advocates.

That opposition continues. Sen. Vincent Illuzzi, R-Essex/Orleans, who is also Essex County state's attorney, said the prospect of mandatory sentences prompts more suspects to take their cases to trial, which presents greater risk that the offender will serve no time. Particularly with sex crimes, he said, there are often no witnesses. "It's sometimes a roll of the dice as to who they're going to believe. Does a prosecutor want to take a chance?"

"Our colleagues in other states with mandatory minimum sentences have indicated we ought to be wary," said Sarah Kenney, public policy coordinator for the Vermont Network Against Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault. "There's no incentive to plead guilty."

Instead, Kenney said the Hulett case spotlights questions about the Corrections Department classification system and the need for more treatment in prison.

Legislators who were making the pitch for longer sentences said they also support increasing the treatment offered in prison. "One thing we can look at is mandating treatment," said Rep. Thomas Depoy, R-Rutland, a member of the House Judiciary Committee. "It's going to be expensive."

Lippert also questioned the classification system. "I have a problem with this sentence but I also have a problem with the Department of Corrections' providing no treatment."

As chairman of the Judicial Retention Committee, Lippert might be among those deciding whether Cashman can keep his job when his term comes up next year. "I'd be surprised if there weren't issues raised," Lippert said.

Amid the torrent of criticism, Illuzzi said that, as a prosecutor and a legislator, he has found Cashman to be a fair and thoughtful judge.

Cashman did not return a call seeking comment Friday. A clerk said judges customarily cannot comment on a case for at least seven days while motions to modify a sentence could still be filed.

Free Press Staff Writers Nancy Remsen and Adam Silverman contributed to this report. Contact Terri Hallenbeck at 229-9141 or thallenb@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com

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[From the Lansing State Journal]

Friday's letters to the editor

Bill harms kids

The LSJ's "Our daily bread" series told about the impacts of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005.

But there's more.

Section 7310 of it ("Mandatory fee for successful child support collection for family that has never received TANF") will also "save" federal dollars by taking money out of child support collections for people who have never received welfare.

That means a child who has never received public assistance will receive less child support because the federal government, with S. 1932, will mandate an annual fee. A child who has never received other public assistance will be paying some of his or her child support to help fund the federal government's deficit reduction.

Some argue it's right to cut funding and get people independent of government aid. But taking money directly from child support collections to help fund a federal deficit reduction plan? Does that seem unconscionable?

Daniel J. Bauer
Charlotte

Deadbeat dad sent to prison

Judge gives father two to four years

Friday, January 13, 2006

By Steven Hepker

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Richard T. Gray left Jackson for South Carolina in 1998 owing \$50,000 in child support, a debt that doubled by his return to Michigan last year.

"The most I can give you on probation is five years, and at \$100,094, that works out to \$1,666 a month," Circuit Judge Edward Grant calculated Thursday. "You can't possibly do that, can you?"

What Gray hasn't done for many years he cannot do for the next two to four years behind bars. Grant gave Gray the maximum sentence under state guidelines.

Gray, 42, was divorced in 1991 with children. He paid child support sporadically for a few years. Grant said Gray is a high school graduate who attended college, served four years in the military and was honorably discharged.

His payments to Friend of the Court were acceptable at times when he worked and payments were withheld from his checks. But he didn't hold down jobs and then quit paying altogether in South Carolina.

"You got wound up in alcohol and drug use," Grant said, reading from his sentencing report. Gray has a history of drunken driving and domestic assault that has yielded 11 misdemeanors and a felony conviction.

The state Attorney General took over the Friend of the Court case in 2005 and prosecuted Gray in Jackson County. The agency generally goes after the biggest offenders statewide, partly as a warning to deadbeat parents they eventually will do time.

ISD gets grant help

Money could target children's programs

1/13/2006 11:00:00 AM

The Sturgis Journal

From Staff Reports

The St. Joseph County Intermediate School District will administer \$90,000 in grants received from the Early Childhood Investment Corporation aimed at early childhood services.

St. Joseph County was one of 14 communities that received a portion of the \$1.24 million grant.

Dr. Jay Newman, superintendent of the St. Joseph County Intermediate School District, said the ISD

will act as a fiscal agent for the grant funds, with oversight by the Human Services Commission.

Initially, the county had applied for \$150,000 in grants, but the \$90,000 is a welcome start for growth and improvements.

Newman said they are "thrilled with the grant" and now are working on the most "effective and efficient" way to use the funds.

One possible goal is to hire an early childhood collaboration coordinator that will work with all agencies that deliver early childhood services.

The coordinator would be able to further engage the groups to work together. There are many effective areas to use the grant funds for early childhood services.

Newman said the early childhood work group will meet on Jan. 26 and discuss options on how to use the grant funds.

State Sen. Cameron Brown lauded the grants.

"I am glad to see these funds used for such a worthy purpose," Brown said in a statement. "I can't think of a better area to invest our money than in our children."

The grants were awarded based on collaboration readiness as well as the number of children in poverty in each community.

The goal of Early Childhood Investment Corporation, a non-profit public corporation, is to promote early learning and childhood development activities.

Each community involved in the grant process will work to create a local body like the Early Childhood Investment Corporation for the purpose to keep the growth of early education moving forward.

Around Metro Detroit: Capitol Report

Lawmakers study options for winter heating bill relief

State leaders are worried about the dramatic jump in natural gas prices.

Gary Heinlein / Detroit News Lansing Bureau
January 13, 2006

LANSING -- Lawmakers hope this month to broaden a program that helps families who are struggling to pay home heating bills.

The cost of heat has gone up \$40-80 a month for the typical homeowner since last year. Despite early January's relatively balmy temperatures, state leaders are worried about the dramatic jump in natural gas prices.

Department of Human Services spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet said the department wants to help more families pay their heating bills; it has the money, she said, to cover the added help. The department hasn't taken a position on specific legislation.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm is seeking more federal money earmarked for heating assistance, Sorbet said. Granholm also has asked the Michigan Public Service Commission to dedicate an added \$25 million that could be made available through a commission order involving Consumers Energy.

"I think we realize we're going to run out of money this year in order to help all of the people who are going to need assistance with heating," Sorbet said.

More Michiganians would qualify for assistance under measures that House Republicans say they want to pass and send to the Senate for final action soon after the Legislature reconvenes on Jan. 25.

Lawmakers are on their annual break from full sessions right now, but some House and Senate committees will meet next week to get bills ready for a vote.

Michigan's energy assistance program is based on income and family size.

The Republican plan calls for an increase in the income guideline under which Michiganians qualify for home heating assistance.

The maximum income allowed for a three-member family to be eligible, for example, would increase from \$17,699 now to \$20,917 as soon as legislation took effect.

Those who qualify can get state treasury drafts that may be used only toward heating bills. Application forms are available from the Michigan Treasury Department, or Michigan Department of Human Services offices in each county.

Republicans are the majority party in both legislative chambers. Other elements of their plan include income tax credits that would be available to low-income families if they bought energy-efficient appliances.

Such families, further, would be exempt from sales tax on energy-efficient appliances and on insulation or other building products that reduce heat loss from homes.

House Democrats have their own package of heating bills.

They want to prohibit power companies from cutting off heat to customers with overdue bills and set up a state information base that groups of volunteers could use in weatherization projects for the poor.

The Democratic plan would take \$5 million from a research fund held by the state's Public Service Commission and would use the money, instead, to help Michiganians pay for heat.

House Republicans may or may not include some of the Democrats' proposals in the final package they send to the Senate.

Residents can get information about state energy assistance programs by calling a toll-free number during the day: 1-800-292-5650.

You can reach Gary Heinlein at (313) 222-2470 or gheinlein@detnews.com.

How they voted: Welfare limits

Here's how Metro Detroit members of the Michigan Senate voted on House bill 893, a measure to limit welfare recipient payments to 48 months (currently there is no limit). The legislation was vetoed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm but lawmakers plan to take up the controversial issue again this year.

Voting "yes": Michael Bishop, R-Rochester; Nancy Cassis, R-Nov; Valde Garcia, R-Howell; Dennis Olshove, D-Warren; Bruce Patterson, R-Canton; Alan Sanborn, R- Richmond; and Laura Toy, R- Livonia.

Voting "no": Raymond Basham, D-Taylor; Gilda Jacobs, D-Huntington Woods; Shirley Johnson, R-Troy; Burton Leland, D-Detroit; Martha Scott, D-Highland Park; Michael Switalski, D-Roseville; and Buzz Thomas, D-Detroit.

Jan 13, 3:55 AM EST
Associated Press

Katrina evacuee family loses heat, power at new Michigan home

HIGHLAND PARK, Mich. (AP) -- Four months after Hurricane Katrina evacuee Linda Davis thanked Michigan business, government and religious leaders for helping her settle in a new home, she had her heat and power temporarily cut off and still is seeking work.

The 31-year-old mother of three boys says the wonderful life she expected to find in Michigan did not materialize.

The utilities that went out on Wednesday because of a billing mix-up were restored Thursday, after Davis spent the night at a neighbor's house.

Now, she says she just wants to go back to Jefferson Parish, La.

"There was a lot of stuff they said they were going to help me with that they didn't," Davis told the Detroit Free Press.

Often when tragedy strikes, donors come forward to help, but three to six months later, they have moved on even as needy people continue to struggle, said Brian Peckinpugh, spokesman for the American Red Cross' Southeast Michigan Chapter. He said there are about 2,000 evacuees in the state.

Davis said she decided to move north when a church group sent a bus to bring evacuees to Michigan.

Once in the state, developer 3rd Day Investments offered her a house in Highland Park rent-free, and another developer promised to help her find a car, job and financing to buy a house.

"Everybody wanted to ... shake hands and be on TV," Davis said of the move-in day.

Davis said the people who promised help stopped returning her calls. She said she found a car and bought it with her Federal Emergency Management Agency payment. She said she is looking for a job on her own.

Davis said she also needed someone to guide her through re-establishing herself. She said she still does not know her way around metropolitan Detroit.

Dina Harris, chief executive of Faith Community Homebuyers Program, said it tried to help Davis but is not set up to address her job-training need. She said Davis has limited education and skills. Harris also said that Davis is not ready for the help her group can provide with home ownership.

Davis never saw the DTE Energy Co. bills because they were in the name of the builder and were sent to another address. The builder stopped paying the bills when Davis moved in and did not transfer the account to 3rd Day Investments, which manages the property.

Building company chief executive Daniel Russell Sr. promised that it would pay for the utilities at least until September.

Information from: Detroit Free Press, <http://www.freep.com>

\$90,000 in place to aid with heat bills

Friday, January 13, 2006

By Brian Wheeler

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At least \$90,000 -- and likely much more -- will be available locally to people stung by this winter's surging home heating bills.

An official with the United Way of Jackson County said some two dozen churches Thursday pledged \$20,000 in help for those whose utilities may be shut off. That is expected to be matched dollar for dollar by money from the state Community Action Agency Association. Another \$50,000 is expected from the city of Jackson.

The pledges, which will be joined by donations from other churches, are the first concrete commitments to help struggling people pay their bills.

Some 2,000 people called the county's 211 information line looking for energy assistance last year, said Bethany Timmons, the United Way's director of community impact. That is expected to grow as the average utility bill rises a projected 50 percent this winter.

"A lot of us are already getting phone calls for help with utility assistance," said the Rev. Jim Watson of Christ Lutheran Church in Michigan Center.

That need spurred the creation of the Utility Assistance Initiative, a collaboration between nonprofits and the faith community. Under a plan the group developed, callers to 211 would be screened, placed in a database and helped by an organization that would tap the pool of money.

Officials project some \$400,000 in help will be needed this year, much of which won't develop until the spring or summer. That's when plans that cap payments expire or when households buckle under to unpaid bills.

"We're in this for the long haul," Timmons said. "A lot of people are dealing with winter bills, but it catches up with them later."

While contributions so far fall short of the \$400,000 figure, they represent only a down payment. Several churches are planning to raise money through special collections or events. Watson said his and two other Lutheran churches will devote proceeds from an upcoming dinner to utility aid.

The United Way also will accept individuals' donations, while Timmons said she expects other sources of money will be available that aren't pooled through her agency.

Several churches already are offering help on their own or have done so in the past. The Rev. Rod Mathews of Spring Arbor Free Methodist Church said his congregation would continue doing that but sees a need to collaborate.

His church pledged \$500 on Thursday, with more to come.

"If we can put some funds and resources together to help a greater number of people," Mathews said, "then that's what we should do."

MIRS

January 12, 2006

Granholt Requests \$25 Million for Home Heating Assistance

Today, Gov. Jennifer **GRANHOLM** sent a letter to members of the Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC) asking the MPSC to make \$25 million available for citizens struggling to pay for heat.

"The high cost of home heating has created a serious financial burden for many of our most vulnerable citizens," Granholt said. "Thanks to the foresight of the MPSC and Consumers Energy, money is available to help, but the commission must act quickly."

At their December meeting, MPSC commissioners approved an order for Consumers Energy that substantially increased the amount of money available for low income and energy efficiency programs. The Governor's letter requested the \$25 million specifically be used for low-income assistance.

In addition to asking the MPSC to act, the Governor also said she would continue to encourage Congress to increase funding for the Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). Last September, Granholt joined a bi-partisan group of 28 governors who sent a letter to Congressional leaders urging Congress to increase funding.

"Congress must recognize that covering dramatic increases in natural gas and heating oil prices will pose an immense challenge for our citizens as winter arrives," the governors wrote.

"Immediate emergency funding and a significant increase in regular LIHEAP funding for FY 2006 would allow critical energy needs to be addressed before a crisis develops."

Hundreds voice concerns over high heating costs

*Stephanie Antonian Rutherford
The Battle Creek Enquirer
January 12, 2006*

The high cost of heating made for hot debate Wednesday night as several hundred area residents packed Burnham Brook to voice their concerns with Semco Energy and local assistance programs.

State Sen. Mark Schauer, D-Bedford Township, hosted the informational session on rising gas rates and financial assistance and to give people an opportunity to address Semco officials about their higher bills. "The purpose of this meeting is to find solutions and get answers, not to beat up on Semco," Schauer urged the audience as he opened the forum.

With those words, a large portion of the audience booed and there were shouts of "Why not?" and "They deserve it," a tone that remained through the evening.

Tim Lubbers, spokesman for Semco, offered insight on the factors that have contributed to the sharp increase in gas heating bills. In some cases, residential bills have increased more than 150 percent compared with last winter, even when residents have used the same, or less, amounts of gas.

"Natural gas prices are high because the supply of gas is much less than the demand," Lubbers said. "Three years ago, Semco bought gas at a fixed rate and we were able to keep prices low in Battle Creek, even as national prices rose."

Lubbers explained that since the fixed rate has expired, Semco now must purchase gas at a much higher rate, one controlled both federally and by the state.

Lubbers' explanation was supported by Bill Mabin, a representative for Consumers Energy, who noted that the cost of gas has sharply increased statewide.

Lubbers and Mabin urged residents who cannot pay their heating bills to contact their heating providers and seek out assistance.

Representatives of The Heat and Warmth Fund (THAW) and the Community Action Agency provided detailed information on local and state assistance programs and contacts for low-income families.

Despite the wealth of information provided, residents were not satisfied.

"I doubt any of you up there have had to go to the welfare office and go through all the hoops and loops that we do to get any assistance," said Jeffery Dinkins of Battle Creek. "It is not very easy."

The crowd addressed the board for more than an hour. Concerns were voiced from senior citizens on limited pensions, people with disabilities, low-income families and middle-class residents. Despite their differences, every speaker had a common concern: How are we going to make it through this winter? And what about next year?

The advice residents got was to lower the dial, weatherize the house and apply for financial assistance — all of which might not dramatically lower the bills.

"My Semco bill was \$1,114 this month," Battle Creek resident Dorothy Height said. "I am a senior and disabled. I can't afford to live. I called Semco and they worked with me and put me on the protection program. It won't solve everything, but at least there is some help, some hope."

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Children faring well in county

Problems persist in poverty, birth defects

Friday, January 13, 2006

BY LISA CAROLIN

News Staff Reporter

Livingston County children fare better than children living in most other counties in Michigan.

That's the assessment drawn this week from the Kids Count data book. The annual assessment shows that Livingston County's poverty rate is the lowest in the state for children ages 0-17 at 4.0 percent compared to a state rate of 14.2 percent. Livingston County has the lowest rate of deaths for children ages 1-14 and the second lowest rate of teenage pregnancy in the state.

The reason, says Bill Sleight, director of Michigan Works, the state's employment agency, is the economic security in the county.

"There is a correlation between the income in this county and the Kids Count indicators," says Sleight. "As the county gains jobs and economic security improves, so do the general indicators."

Sleight adds that the data masks a significant number of people who live above the poverty line but are still in economic distress. He says Livingston County has an average wage of \$34,106 and an unemployment rate of 4.1 percent, which is one of the lowest in the state.

Alissa Parks, a community planner for the Livingston County Human Services Collaborative Body, says, "It's difficult being poor in this county. It's difficult to access funding and there is little affordable housing."

She says that \$640 is considered the fair market rate for a monthly housing payment and that's more than many people can afford. Despite faring better than most counties in Michigan, that's just one of the issues facing the county. Although the county's number of confirmed victims of child abuse and neglect is the third lowest in the state, that number increased 36 percent from last year. Susan Fulton, director of the Livingston County Department of Human Services, says the increase is due to the growing population and greater public awareness about child abuse, which means a higher number of victims being identified.

"Livingston County has very strong early intervention for kids, and the increase in abuse has not kept up with the population growth," says Fulton.

She says the number of licensed foster homes in the county has increased to 45, but there is still a need for more homes for teens.

When it comes to younger children, Livingston County had 9.8 percent of its infants born with birth defects between 2001 and 2003 compared with a state average of 6.4 percent.

Ted Westmeier, director of the Livingston County Department of Public Health, says his department is investigating whether more interventions are needed, but adds that there could also be reporting issues regarding the accuracy of those numbers.

"One initiative this year is to do a more in-depth study of birth records and look at the birth defects rate," says Westmeier.

The Kids Count in Michigan annual data book is a collaborative project of the Michigan League for Human Services and Michigan's Children.

MIRS

January 12, 2006

DCH Recognizes High Performing Medicaid Health Plans

The Health Plan Employer Data and Information Set (HEDIS) recently said that Michigan Medicaid's 15 managed health care service plans have improved immunizations for kids, diabetes care and prenatal and postpartum care.

The 2005 HEDIS is developed and maintained by the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) to measure performance with managed care programs.

Michigan's health plans currently provide services to more than 920,000 enrollees.

Fifteen of Michigan's 16 health plans have successfully completed the HEDIS review.

"The Michigan Department of Community Health (DCH) commends the Medicaid health plans on their achievements in 2005," said DCH director Janet **OLSZEWSKI**. "We are proud of the Michigan Medicaid health plans and the work they and the health care provider community do every day to improve and protect the health and well being of Michigan's most vulnerable citizens."

The study showed improved performance in 15 of the health plans. Most of the plans had a prenatal care program to help pregnant women get proper care and operated a smoking cessation program to help people quit smoking.

State Orders Help for Elderly as Medicare Glitches Spread

- California joins other states in giving seniors emergency assistance. Bush's signature program draws sharp criticism nationwide.

*By Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar and Peter Nicholas,
Los Angeles Times Staff Writers*

SACRAMENTO — California officials ordered emergency action Thursday to cover drug costs for 1 million elderly citizens, many of whom have been denied life-saving medications or charged exorbitant amounts because of glitches in the new federal prescription drug program.

The action by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's administration capped a day in which the Medicare prescription drug program — one of President Bush's signature domestic policy initiatives — came under sharp criticism from members of Congress and governors of both major political parties.

Critics said the program, which Bush has touted as the most significant advance in Medicare in 40 years, was fast becoming a public health emergency. California officials said that as many as one-fifth of the 1 million elderly, poor or disabled state residents who were switched into the federal program on Jan. 1 could be wrongly denied their medications because of flaws in the program.

In Illinois, Gov. Rod Blagojevich, a Democrat, took action similar to Schwarzenegger's, ordering state funds to be used to provide emergency drug coverage for the elderly. Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, a leading figure among Republican governors on health policy issues, took a similar step Wednesday. Nine states, including California, have stepped in to fill the gaps in the federal program.

Bush has staked considerable political capital on the Medicare program, and Democrats were quick to seize on its problems. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) criticized the program at a news conference as "a bad policy poorly implemented."

"It's a double whammy," Clinton said.

Medicare officials in Washington said they were dismayed by the problems and were working around the clock to resolve them. The program is working for most people, said Medicare spokesman Gary Karr, adding that up to 40,000 prescriptions an hour are being successfully dispensed during peak times.

"Many states are reporting they really don't have any problems," Karr said. "Most of the pharmacies seem to be reporting to us that things were easier this week than last week."

The problems with the Medicare drug benefit do not yet seem serious enough to lead to an immediate repeal effort.

But the spectacle of governors bailing out Washington, poor people unable to get their medications and pharmacists angry over not getting paid could damage the Bush administration's credibility on healthcare — an important election-year issue that the White House wants to showcase in President Bush's State of the Union speech, which is scheduled for Jan. 31.

James Firman, president of the National Council on the Aging and a supporter of the program, said that

continued problems could cause deep trouble for the entire program.

"Right now the pressure isn't to repeal it, but to get it right," he said. "I think everybody underestimated the complexity involved. If these problems don't get fixed in four to six weeks, it's going to be very serious."

The root of the current problems is a provision of the Medicare prescription drug law that automatically switched about 6 million elderly, low-income and disabled people into the new program Jan. 1.

Those people had previously been covered by Medicaid — Medi-Cal in California — the joint state-federal healthcare program for the poor.

Moving that many people into the new program, all at one time, appears to have overwhelmed the complicated Medicare drug benefit system.

In designing the program, the Bush administration did not want the Medicare drug benefit to be administered directly by the federal government.

Instead, it devised a public program run by hundreds of competing private drug plans, each with its own prices and coverage policies.

In many cases, pharmacists and patient-advocates say, elderly people are being denied benefits because of inaccurate or outdated information in computer databases used by the government and the individual health plans to interact with pharmacies.

In some cases, there is no information on a beneficiary, or the computer says the beneficiary is ineligible for coverage. In other cases, cost-sharing information is wrong, and pharmacists are being told to charge beneficiaries hundreds of dollars when in fact they have co-payments of only \$1 to \$5.

"We've been inundated with calls about this, so we're thrilled" by the state's action, said Sandy Risdon, program manager of the Center for Health Care Rights in Los Angeles, an advocacy organization for Medicare beneficiaries.

Staff attorney Deepti Sethi said the center had received as many as 40 emergency calls a day from patients who were told that they could not get their prescription drugs or were asked to pay unaffordable amounts.

"People are walking out without their medicine across the board — high-blood-pressure medicine, insulin, pain medication," she said, adding that the problems were putting people at risk for stroke and other health problems. "This is the most vulnerable population."

Kim Belshé, secretary of California's Health and Human Services Agency, said at a news conference announcing the state's plan that the Bush administration's implementation of the Medicare plan has been "troubling."

"These individuals are some of the most vulnerable Californians," Belshé said. "Because of the problems our residents are having accessing their prescription coverage, Gov. Schwarzenegger has decided to step up and provide temporary coverage."

Under the plan, the state will use its own money to essentially continue the coverage that patients had under Medi-Cal before Jan. 1. Providing the coverage will cost the state as much as \$70 million over the next two weeks.

State officials here and elsewhere said they would ask Congress and the Bush administration for reimbursement.

In a statement, Schwarzenegger said he would use emergency powers to cover the costs for five days and seek immediate legislation to ensure coverage for a total of 15 days.

Californians would be reimbursed for any out-of-pocket expenses that have exceeded their \$1 to \$5 co-payment, officials said. They encouraged those who had been denied medications to return to their pharmacies to try again and see whether the Medicare system can now accommodate their requests. If not, the state, as the "payer of last resort," would cover the cost, officials said.

According to the Health and Human Services Agency, pharmacies should provide prescription drugs to anyone who was covered by Medi-Cal before Jan. 1. If reimbursement is denied by the new Medicare system, the pharmacy should seek reimbursement from the state.

Schwarzenegger, in a prepared statement, said: "While I am confident the federal government will resolve the problems with this transition, these people need our help now, and we're going to be there for them."

The Democratic leaders of the Assembly and Senate said Thursday that they would cooperate in the effort but expressed skepticism that the Bush administration would resolve the program's problems as quickly as Schwarzenegger hoped.

"I don't have a lot of faith in the Bush administration's promises that this will be fixed anytime soon," said Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez (D-Los Angeles). "It says a lot when there's such bipartisan outrage at the feds' inability to implement a program that's so vital to so many."

Administration officials said they would examine the situation at month's end. If the federal government has not improved service, the state would consider whether it should stop providing emergency help, said a spokeswoman for the state Health and Human Services Agency.

Healthcare advocates in California praised Schwarzenegger for stepping in to provide assistance, but questioned why it took nearly two weeks for the governor to act.

"We knew this train wreck was going to happen," said Angela Gilliard, a lobbyist for the Western Center on Law and Poverty in Sacramento. "We've been saying there was no way when they flipped the switch on Jan. 1, people wouldn't be harmed. No way. We're glad the state acted now."

Dr. Jack Lewin, chief executive of the California Medical Assn., said Schwarzenegger had "saved thousands of lives."

"This may be the single most important healthcare action he has taken as governor for the nearly 1 million of the neediest patients in California," Lewin said.

With Congress still away on its holiday recess, reaction in Washington to the program's problems has been muted.

But Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) wrote Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt on Friday to express disappointment with the transition for low-income seniors.

"Switching drug benefits from 50 state-based Medicaid programs to dozens of Medicare prescription drug plans would be complicated under any circumstance," wrote Baucus, who voted in favor of creating the benefit in 2003.

"But this task is particularly challenging since these individuals are among the sickest and most vulnerable of all Medicare beneficiaries. Yet despite the awareness of potential problems, [Medicare] has failed to adequately protect these beneficiaries."

Times staff writer Teresa Watanabe contributed to this report.

*News in a Minute:
Detroit Free Press
January 12, 2006*

WAYNE: Student, 15, charged with making false bomb threat

A 15-year-old student at Wayne Memorial High School allegedly wrote a crude, profanity-laced bomb threat on the wall of one of the school's boys restrooms, officials said.

The teen was charged with making a false bomb threat -- a felony -- at an appearance Wednesday before Wayne County Family Court Referee David Perkins.

According to a police report filed with the court, another student told a teacher Monday afternoon that there was a threat written on the tiles above the urinals in the second-floor boys restroom. Someone had written in pencil over several tiles, "I will blow the school up on 1/11/06," according to the report.

A teacher said she recognized the handwriting as that of a student to whom she had given a pass to visit the bathroom on Monday.

The teen, who is a special education student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, confessed.

The boy, who was suspended from school, was released from the Wayne County Juvenile Detention Facility Wednesday after his parents posted 10% of a \$5,000 bond pending a hearing Feb. 9.

By Jack Kresnak

Foster grandparents to be recognized

The Huron Daily Tribune
01/11/2006

THUMB AREA — Approximately 900 foster grandparent volunteers are being recognized Jan. 18 for contributing 900,000 annual hours of service to children with special needs and their communities across the state of Michigan. Foster grandparent programs serve in 59 counties across Michigan; these programs provide seniors 60 and older an opportunity for challenging and meaningful service to children in their local communities. Partnering with numerous nonprofit organizations enable older adults to have a positive impact in such areas as literacy, mentoring, school preparedness, decreased juvenile delinquency and nurturing exceptional needs children, as well as other community needs.

The local foster grandparent program is managed through Human Development Commission (HDC). HDC has 55 foster grandparents serving in preschools, elementary, middle, and parochial schools throughout Huron, Sanilac and Tuscola counties.

Julia DeGuise, foster grandparent Program supervisor, states, "The grandparents love it, but the greatest measurement of success comes from the teachers. We continually hear from teachers that so many more of our kids are successful because of the foster grandparents providing that extra one-on-one time." Anyone wishing to learn more about the foster grandparent program can contact Julia at HDC by calling (989) 673-4121. The significant service provided by foster grandparent volunteers helps to strengthen the future of our children and our communities.

Join others across the state of Michigan in proclaiming Jan. 18 as Foster Grandparent Volunteer Day.

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County safety nets get MSHDA funds

*By Roland Stoy/Staff Writer
The Coldwater Daily Reporter
January 12, 2006*

COLDWATER — Agencies that represent a significant portion of the safety net for Branch County met with the Housing and Homeless Coalition Tuesday, seeking a slice of a \$159,900 state funding pie.

The money is in the form of an annual grant from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA).

When the coalition had finished deliberations after meeting with the principals late in the afternoon, only one of the four agencies, the Branch County Coalition Against Domestic Violence (BCCADV, Shelterhouse), came away with a bit less than they had requested.

Michigan

Funds go to aid inmates, families

County agency is given \$1 million

January 12, 2006

BY KATHLEEN GRAY

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

A pair of grants awarded to the Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency, worth more than \$1 million, will be used to help Oakland County inmates and prisoners reconnect more easily with their families and communities.

One grant, worth \$660,000 this year, is geared toward helping ex-offenders returning to Oakland County from county jails or state prisons to get a job, housing and mentors in their communities.

The goal is to ease the transition between incarceration and community life and reduce the number of offenders who commit more crimes and end up back in jail after being released. A study by the U.S. Department of Labor found that stable employment is one of the most important factors for ex-offenders to successfully re-enter society.

"The goal of the program is to reduce recidivism," said Lynn Crotty, director of the child development division at OLHSA, who gave a report on the grants Monday. "Nationally, the goal is to serve 6,200 ex-offenders. In Michigan, we have to serve 200 people in the first year."

OLHSA was one of 550 agencies nationwide to apply for the grant, which is funded by the U.S.

Departments of Labor, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services and Justice. Only 30 groups got the grant and OLHSA was the only one in Michigan. The 30 groups can apply to renew the grant in each of the next three years.

The other grant from the Skillman Foundation will allow OLHSA to expand its Connections program, which works to strengthen the bonds between parents in the Oakland County Jail and their children.

The program has been operating since 2003 through the Head Start program, allowing incarcerated parents of children up to the age of 5 to meet with their children and continues with support services after their release.

The Skillman grant, worth \$100,000 a year for the next three years, will let OLHSA expand the program so children up to the age of 18 can meet with their parents. Thirty-one families have been served since the program began in 2003 and only one of those parents has returned to jail after being released, said Crotty. Marie Denman has been chosen to participate with David, her 3-year-old son.

She admits she probably would never qualify for a Mother of the Year, award, at least not at the moment. But after four months in the Connections program, Denman has hope for a better future.

The 26-year-old Holly resident has been at the Oakland County Jail's work release facility since September and isn't scheduled for release until March 1. When she met the criteria last year for the Connections program -- a nonviolent offender with no domestic violence, sexual assault or child abuse in her background and with the caregiver of her son willing to participate in the program -- she began getting twice-monthly visits with her son. As part of the program, she has to take parenting, substance abuse and life-skills classes.

On the off weeks, Denman's caseworker Kathie Flanery visits David at the home he shares with Denman's mother and stepfather.

"One of my big concerns is how is he going to handle seeing me in here," said Denman.

But David has made the adjustment to seeing his mother only periodically in a place where everyone wears the same navy blue uniform and waves at him from behind bulletproof glass.

"He doesn't know I'm incarcerated," said Denman, a recovering heroin addict who has a history of property crimes. "He just knows that mom is at a place to get healthy and when I'm completely healthy, I'm coming home."

So David's favorite number these days is three -- he's 3 years old and in just three more visits to the jail, his mom comes home.

Contact **KATHLEEN GRAY** at 313-223-4407

Group's goal is to promote self-sufficiency

- The Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency's mission is to enable low income, elderly and disabled people living in Oakland and Livingston counties to become self-sufficient.
The agency just received two grants to help ex-inmates acclimate to their communities easier once they're released:
- \$100,000 a year for the next three years from the Skillman Foundation to help strengthen the bond between incarcerated parents and their children.
- \$660,000 from the U.S. Department of Labor to provide employment, housing and mentoring services to offenders after their release from county jails or state prisons.

Kathleen Gray

Driven to help others

Volunteers transport people in need

By Federico Martinez
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Her soft voice was barely audible at the other end of the phone line.

"Mrs. Bodman," the 21-year-old sobbed. "My baby died."

One day earlier, Muskegon Township resident Bernice Bodman had transported the pregnant, homeless young woman to a Grand Rapids hospital for a checkup. Bodman, 68, is a volunteer driver for Muskegon County's Department of Human Services.

Physical complications prompted a premature delivery. The baby died 45 minutes after birth.

"Can you visit me for a few minutes?" pleaded the 21-year-old, who had no family or friends to turn to for support.

Although she barely knew the girl, and it wasn't part of her volunteer job description, Bodman spent the next afternoon with the grieving young mother.

"Twenty-one and all alone — and you lose your baby," a sympathetic Bodman says.

Bodman is one of several Muskegon-area residents who volunteer their time and vehicles and open their hearts to clients who need transportation to doctor appointments and other medical services. Volunteers' duties also include transporting children to and from foster homes, and taking children to visit ailing parents.

"The volunteers' work is truly an act of goodwill," said Hillary Williams, community resource coordinator for Muskegon County's Department of Human Services. Drivers receive gas

and mileage reimbursement, but aren't otherwise paid.

"When you volunteer, it's really tough," Williams said. "It's not like they are getting a paycheck."

"They want to be there. They're very special in that aspect."

► DRIVERS from 1A

Their efforts are especially appreciated by DHS agencies like Muskegon County's, which has seen staffing reduced due to state budget cuts, Williams said.

Helping people is nothing new for Bodman, who began volunteering as a DHS driver two years ago. Over the years, Bodman and her husband, Nils, have taken in ailing relatives and helped neighbors in declining health.

"I enjoy driving and helping people," Bodman said. "I enjoy talking to people."

Muskegon's Gilberto Trevino, 63, said volunteering and helping others gives him a sense of purpose. Trevino, who is disabled, has been a volunteer driver for 2 1/2 years.

The key is to treat each client with respect and dignity, Trevino said. Volunteers have to learn to recognize when a pas-

engers wants to talk or prefers to be alone with their thoughts, he said.

How to help

■ For information about how to volunteer for the local Department of Human Services, call Hillary Williams, community resource coordinator, at 773-3695.

Trevino frequently transports veterans to Ann Arbor for medical treatment. Earlier this week, he drove to St. Ignace to pick up a troubled teenager and bring him back to a Muskegon foster home.

Bonds often form with regular passengers, Trevino said. "We're like the family many of them don't have," Trevino said. "I look forward to the trips. It gives me a reason to get up in the morning."

Foster parents like Nancy and Chuck Townsend in Raven-

on said volunteers like Bodman and Trevino play a vital role.

On average, the Townsends have about eight foster children in their home at one time, said Nancy Townsend. It's difficult to care for that many children and try to transport all of them if one or more has a medical, or some other, appointment.

"It's a matter of working together," Nancy Townsend said. "They're a blessing to have."

The hardest part of being a volunteer is understanding there is only so much help you can offer, Bodman said. "This past fall, Bodman transported three children to a Flint nursing home to visit their terminally ill mother.

Their last visit was Dec. 17. Four days later, the mother died, Bodman said with a sigh.

"I'm glad they had a chance to see their mother one more time," Bodman said. "But it was sad."

Please see DRIVERS 4A ►



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
LANSING

JOHN D. CHERRY, JR.
LT. GOVERNOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 12, 2006

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet
(517) 373-7394

Children's Trust Fund check-off returns to Michigan tax forms

Taxpayers are encouraged to help fight child abuse via their 2005 returns

LANSING –The Department of Human Services today announced this tax season taxpayers have the opportunity to help fight child abuse when filing Michigan taxes using the Children's Trust Fund (CTF) Michigan income tax check-off.

"No child should live in fear of abuse and preventing abuse is what the CTF check-off is all about," Governor Jennifer M. Granholm said. "Children are the future of this great state and by contributing to CTF you are making an investment in Michigan's future that is guaranteed to pay off."

Public Act 160 of 2005 amended the Income Tax Act to reinstate the income tax check-off that allows taxpayers to contribute money to the CTF. An individual can now designate on his or her annual return that a contribution of \$5 or more of his or her refund be credited to the CTF for tax years beginning January 1, 2005.

"Child abuse is an all too common problem in Michigan – a child is reported as abused or neglected every four minutes," Richard Bearup, director of the Children's Trust Fund, said. "The CTF helps prevent child abuse and neglect. Reinstating the income tax check-off allows us to continue to provide much-needed financial support for a variety of important child abuse and neglect prevention programs throughout the state."

From 1983 through 2000 a check-off on Michigan's income tax form allowed an individual to donate \$2 or more of his or her refund to the CTF. During that time, over 2.2 million Michigan tax returns generated over \$14.8 million for the CTF. After 2000, the CTF's balance exceeded \$20 million and the check-off was discontinued at that time in accordance with a provision in the Income Tax Act that required the removal of the check-off when the fund's balance exceeded that amount.

In the years since then, only the interest and earnings of the CTF have been available for disbursement. Fluctuations in the stock market have resulted in slower growth than was expected for the CTF's assets, causing concern that the CTF would not earn enough to cover its future obligations.

The CTF provides funding to 71 local child abuse and neglect councils, representing 81 of Michigan's 83 counties. Dollars donated to CTF are also used to provide funding for prevention programs in the donor's own community.

"Michigan taxpayers are encouraged to join in the fight against child abuse and neglect by donating via their tax returns this year," Nancy Moody, CTF board chair, said. "Every dollar spent on prevention saves the state \$20 in crisis management. Through the goodwill of Michigan taxpayers putting their money where their heart is, they will not only protect Michigan's children, but they will also save precious state resources for other needed organizations like our schools."

-MORE-

The check-off is located on line 30 of the Michigan tax form. Taxpayers will need to fill in the amount they wish to donate, with the minimum being \$5. The donation can be deducted on the next year's tax form.

In addition to the CTF check-off, residents wishing to contribute to the CTF can do so by sending a check or money order directly to the CTF at P.O. Box 30037, Lansing, MI 48909. Residents are also encouraged to participate in the CTF's local fund raising activities.

The CTF is the only statewide, non-profit organization in Michigan dedicated solely to the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Since 1982, the CTF has raised over \$80 million and provided support to over 8 million children and families. The CTF is administratively housed within the Michigan Department of Human Services.

For more information about the CTF call (517) 373-4320 or visit the Michigan Department of Human Services Web site at www.michigan.gov/dhs and click on Boards and Commissions and then on Children's Trust Fund.

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JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Release

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

Three high performing Michigan offices to be part of federal visit

January 13, 2006

Michigan Department of Human Services offices in Battle Creek, Lansing and Saginaw will be part of a federal tour of Midwestern welfare offices during February. The tour, being conducted by staff from the USDA Food and Nutrition Services Midwest regional office from Chicago, is to see what these offices do that makes them exceptional administrators of the federal Food Stamp Program (called Food Assistance Program in Michigan.)

"There are a number of high performing Food Stamp Program offices in the Midwest region that clearly stand a cut above the rest," Tim English, regional director of the federal Food Stamp Program, said in a Dec. 22 letter. "The Food and Nutrition Service's goal is to find out what exactly makes some offices perform at a high level — what do they have in common, and share that information across states/regions.

English stated that they will observe the offices day-to-day operations to find certain characteristics that they have in common. Their current plans are to conduct 15 local office visits this year as listed below.

"Michigan has three of the 15 high performing sites identified in the Midwest," said DHS director Marianne Udow. "We are proud of these achievements from local office staff in these and all Michigan counties for their contributions in more effectively administering our state's program."

Federal representatives intend to use the one-day visits to gather information through observation and interviews. Their tentative schedule includes visits to:

Hamilton County, Ohio – week of January 23, 2006

Saginaw County, Michigan – week of February 13, 2006

Ingham County, Michigan – week of February 13, 2006

Berrien County, Michigan – week of February 20, 2006

Butler County, Ohio – week of March 6, 2006

Montgomery County, Ohio – week of March 6, 2006

Ramsey County, Minnesota – week of April 17, 2006

Michigan Avenue Office, Illinois – week of April 17, 2006

Winnebago County, Illinois – week of May 15, 2006

Lake County, Illinois – week of May 15, 2006

Delaware County, Indiana – week of June 19, 2006

Benton County, Minnesota, - week of June 5, 2006

Allen County, Indiana, - week of July 10, 2006

Dane County, Wisconsin – week of July 24, 2006

Racine County, Wisconsin – week of July 24, 2006

For more information on Michigan's Food Assistance Program go to www.michigan.gov/dhs

Hope-for-Best Budget

Tough realities test state's ability to make ends meet

January 13, 2006

Editorials/Detroit Free Press

The governor and state lawmakers will need considerable self-discipline -- no new pet projects, for starters -- simply to maintain services for the next couple years. The state must brace itself for auto cutbacks and still higher unemployment rates.

That's the upshot from a gathering of the state's economic gurus Thursday, as they determined how much money is available for the remainder of this fiscal year and the next one.

There is, temporarily, a bit of good news. The budget year that ended Sept. 30 closed with a confirmed surplus in the state's general fund, and revenue so far this year also is running a hair above projections. Much of it is needed to cover promises already made -- to universities, for example -- and to fill the hole opened up by cutting the Single Business Tax after the budget year had already begun.

Still, the state ought to

make every effort to store up, in the Rainy Day Fund, the roughly \$150 million in unexpected, onetime revenue from last year. At least half of that arrived in the form of estate taxes, which are now phased out. In that respect, it is truly "found" money -- exactly the kind of dollars that ought to be stashed for hard times and shouldn't get counted as part of the regular revenue stream because it's not ongoing.

Having some money in the Rainy Day Fund may be crucial next year. Budget figures settled on during Thursday's conference suggest general revenues will show only meager growth in 2007. The estimate accounts for rising unemployment, which most economists predict, but not for some of the worst-case scenarios that could occur as the auto industry retrenches or if the national economy falters.

Meanwhile, welfare is already straining the current budget and Congress is working on changes that could crimp Medicaid and other social services even more. Mary Lannoye, the state's budget director, said next year's budget -- aside from the School Aid Fund, which should grow at least in line with inflation -- is starting "hundreds of millions of dollars in the red."

Yet again, Michigan's leaders must hope for the best -- but prepare for the worst.

Published January 13, 2006

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Tax cuts: Before business plan can advance, show state the spending cuts

A Lansing State Journal editorial

Legislative Republicans plan next week to start pushing another round of tax cuts at the Capitol, this version aimed at Michigan's small businesses.

Again, tax cuts are fine to consider - but only if the cuts come with detailed plans on how to compensate for the reduced state revenue.

Republican leaders say their proposal would affect 32,000 businesses, with an average tax reduction of \$938 per year. OK. That could provide a little boost to small firms struggling to survive in Michigan's unsettled economy.

But then comes the hard part - what to do about the \$30 million a year this tax break would remove from the state treasury?

It is not difficult for any individual citizen to point out something state government shouldn't do or should do more efficiently. But critics also need to grant that state government isn't what it used to be.

Last year, Tom Clay of the Citizens Research Council of Michigan told the Associated Press that the state work force is down to 1974 levels. And thanks to a weakened economy and repeated rounds of tax cutting, state revenues are about the size they were a decade ago.

Meanwhile, spending on Medicaid, schools and corrections have steadily increased - during a period when Republicans have controlled the Legislature. Based on those facts, where is the new political will to start trimming away at popular spending programs?

Granted, \$30 million isn't a huge sum compared to Michigan's roughly \$9 billion general fund budget. It's possible for Republicans to argue that this tax cut will hardly be the ruin of things.

But that works both ways. If \$30 million isn't that much of the budget, then it shouldn't be hard for the Legislature to come up with \$30 million in cuts, up front, to finance the tax breaks.

For ideas, how about the spending on the Legislature and governor's office?

Even through last year's brutal budget fight, top lawmakers somehow managed to squeeze in budget increases for their own operations.

As a simple matter of fairness, shouldn't lawmakers and their staffs take cuts before any public services are whacked?

Until that time, these business tax cuts should sit on the shelf.

MIRS
January 12, 2006

Economists Agree on 7.1 Percent Unemployment For '06

Michigan can expect the state's 6.8 percent unemployment rate for 2005 to jump back to 7.1 percent in 2006 and 2007 as the dark clouds of more automobile industry layoffs loom over the Great Lakes State, according to the figures emerging from today's Consensus Revenue Estimating Conference.

After hearing doom-and-gloom forecasts of lower automobile sales, more plant closings and more people pushed into early retirement, the Senate Fiscal Agency (SFA), House Fiscal Agency (HFA) and the state Treasurer are projecting a .6 percent decrease in employment in 2006 from 4.36 million paid positions to 4.334 million.

The three agencies agree that the employment drop should start evening out in FY 2007.

George **FULTON**, from the Research Seminar in Quantitative Economics, said if employment levels decrease again in 2006, it would be the sixth straight year of job losses in Michigan, marking the longest streak in employment losses since World War II.

While Fulton, unlike SFA/HFA/Treasury, projected employee growth in 2007, he said it would be the weakest example of positive growth in the past 50 years. He foresees an unemployment rate of 6.9 in 2006 and 7.4 in 2007.

"The meager job growth isn't enough to choke off the upward drift in unemployment," Fulton said.

For those with a job, it's projected that a personal income will increase above the rate of inflation in both FY 2006 and FY 2007. The Consumer Price Index is expected to rise 2.6 percent in 2006 and 1.9 percent in 2007. Personal income is projected to increase 4.2 percent in 2006 and 2.5 percent in 2007.

Will Mich. see recovery soon? Not in '06, state analysts say

Unemployment rate expected to rise with growing plant layoffs

By Chris Andrews

Lansing State Journal

Published January 13, 2006

Looking for that glimmer of hope that the economy is rebounding?

You'll have to squint a little harder. And wait a while longer.

Michigan's leading economists warned Thursday that more tough times lie ahead. More plant closings more layoffs, fewer jobs - at least through 2007. State officials project Michigan's unemployment rate will average 7.1 percent this year and next. That's up from the 6.2 percent rate in November, the latest available figure.

"The general assessment is that we haven't bottomed out yet," said Gary Olson, director of the Senate Fiscal Agency. "Maybe we'll hit the bottom in 2006, maybe not."

Olson, State Treasurer Jay Rising and House Fiscal Agency Director Mitch Bean agreed on revenue projections for the state after a morning of testimony from leading economists. Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the Legislature will use those numbers in crafting next year's budget.

All signs point to another lean year.

State officials forecast general fund revenue of \$8.4 billion in fiscal 2007, up about 2 percent from this year. The \$11.6 billion estimate for school aid was up about 3.2 percent from this year's expected revenue.

Projections for this year were changed slightly - up a little for the general fund and down a little for schools - but state budget director Mary Lannoye said she doesn't expect midyear budget cuts.

Still, she warned that with cost pressures from Medicaid and employee costs, as well as cuts in the state's single business tax, things will be tight.

"It's going to be a tough year - we're talking hundreds of millions of dollars short," Lannoye said. "We're going to have some difficult decisions to make to make this all add up."

Lannoye will present Granholm's proposed 2007 budget to the Legislature on Feb. 9.

State Rep. Scott Hummel, R-DeWitt, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, said he looked at the revenue estimates as good news, especially for schools.

"It doesn't give us a lot of money, but at least the revenue is up," he said. "We're not going backward."

I'll take that as an optimistic sign."

Economists testifying Thursday said the state's economy remains largely dependent on the domestic auto industry, which continues to struggle.

They said they expect General Motors Corp. and Ford Motor Co. to continue to lose market share and therefore continue to retrench.

"GM will soon become the size of Ford; Ford will become the size of Chrysler," said Sean McAlinden, chief economist for the Center for Automotive Research.

"And Chrysler, thank God, will stay the size of Chrysler."
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